Approved For Release 2006/12/19 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000200160014-4

27 July 1971

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Historical Setting and Evolution of the Indochina Struggle

The current struggle in Indochina is a complex one rooted in that area's extremely complicated history. The major historical events and developments bearing on the current situation are sketched below in compressed and summary form.

I. The Colonial Era Background

The current struggle in Indochina has its roots in the area's colonial past. French interest in the area began with the missionary activities of French Catholic priests in the 17th century. In the late 18th century a French priest protected and became the advisor of a Vietnamese noble who, with the aid of a force of French mercenaries, won out in a complex and bloody civil war and united all of what is now known as Vietnam for the first time in history under one rule -- his. This noble, Nguyen Anh, was crowned at Hue in 1802 (as Emperor Gia Long). The house of Nguyen reigned until its last member, Bao Dai, was deposed in 1955.

French territorial conquest, in the sense of open political control, began with a joint Franco-Spanish punitive expedition (to protect Catholic missionaries and their Vietnamese converts) in 1856.

By 1862, the French had acquired full sovereignty over the southern part of Vietnam, then known as Cochin China. They gradually extended their control northward. In 1883 central and northern Vietnam, then known as Annam and Tonkin, became French protectorates. Laos and Cambodia became French protectorates in this same period (Cambodia in 1863, Laos in 1893).

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The period of more or less uncontested French governance of Indochina lasted for about four decades, during which the French had to cope with continuing internal unrest but not with external pressure.

In a certain sense, the current struggle in Indochina is a result of the haphazard, but profound, way in which World War II impacted on this area. Shortly after France fell in May 1940, the Gaullist Governor General of Indochina escaped and the French administration in the area came under control of the Petain/Lavalle government in Vichy. The Japanese, at war with China since 1937 and preparing for their larger war with the U.S., demanded and received the right to move men and supplies through Indochina and station troops there to protect these movements. In effect, the Japanese took over the area in 1940, though they left the pro-Vichy French administration in nominal charge.

In March 1945, the Japanese threw aside the facade of French governance and took the area over, interning French troops and authorities and killing those who resisted. The Japanese then declared Vietnam an independent country with Emperor Bao Dai as Chief of State.

II. The Communist Party and the Franco-Viet Minh War

The next major set of players on the stage of Vietnamese history were the leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party -- now called the Lao Dong -- organized and run throughout the rest of his lifetime by the man who after World War II called himself Ho Chi Minh.

After a period of organizational activity in the 1920's, the Indochinese Communist Party, under the aegis of the Comintern, was formally established in February 1930 by Ho (a Comintern agent) during a meeting of Vietnamese revolutionaries in Hong Kong. The Vietnamese Communist Party was pledged to remove the French colonial administration, but it also called for the implementation of a Marxist "national democratic revolution" in Vietnam.

During the 1930's, the Party's fortunes varied with the changes of government in Paris. In the 1930-36 period, the Party was severely repressed, particularly after Party-inspired revolts in the central Vietnamese provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh in 1931 were put down by the French. The Party's ranks were bled white, with its leadership either in jail or overseas.

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With the advent of the Popular Front government in Paris in 1936, the French colonial authorities changed their attitude toward the Vietnamese Communists. Party members and cadres were released from jail and the Party operated semi-legally in Vietnam. Without forsaking its revolutionary objectives, the Party took advantage of the prevailing liberalized conditions to attempt to increase its appeal among the populace through legal methods and activities and a less openly militant platform.

By 1939 the Popular Front government in Paris has been replaced and the French hardened their attitude toward the Vietnamese Communists, particularly after the Nazi-Soviet pact was signed in August 1939. The Party then went underground.

1940-41 was a period of turmoil in Indochina following the fall of France. In 1941, the Indochinese Communist Party was reorganized and Ho Chi Minh, who had been directing the movement from overseas as a Comintern representative, took personal control. At this time, however, the Party's leadership was in exile in China. In May 1941, the Viet Minh Independence Front was proclaimed -- ostensibly to unify all Vietnamese nationalist elements in fighting the Japanese, actually to enable the Communist Party to gain complete control of the nationalist movement.

During the war years, the Viet Minh did render services for the Allies, including providing escape routes for downed flyers and providing intelligence to our OSS teams. However, much of the arms and money provided by the U.S. and the Chinese Nationalists was squirreled away for later use against the French and most of the military action undertaken by the Communists was directed at other Vietnamese nationalist groups not willing to accept Communist control.

Meanwhile, the Party set about planning its moves, expanding and preparing its organization. In late 1944 the first elements of the Party's military branch was established and the organizational groundwork laid for what became the PAVN (i.e., what we now call the North Vietnamese Army).

In August 1945, within days after the Japanese surrender and before the Allies, including the French, were able to do anything, the Communists decided that the situation was ripe for action. The Bao Dai government

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was very weak and the situation unsettled. On August 19, the Viet Minh -- now completely under Communist Party control -- seized Hanoi. The Communist revolt soon spread throughout all the main urban centers and by the end of the month, Vietnam was under the control of the Viet Minh. On September 2, 1945, Ho Chi Minh formally proclaimed the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) with himself as its President.

The events leading up to the outbreak of the Franco-Viet Minh conflict were complicated. In general, the French slowly reassumed control of Vietnam beginning in the fall of 1945 in Cochin China, and they gradually replaced Chinese and British occupation forces which were stationed in Vietnam according to the Potsdam agreements.

During this period, the DRV, sensing the inevitable clash with the French, began negotiating with Paris in the hope of buying time and having its independence formally sanctioned by Paris. Ho Chi Minh himself went to France in 1946 in an attempt to reach some sort of agreement with the French. Despite some paper agreements, this and other negotiating efforts proved unsuccessful.

The situation reached a head in late 1946 and on December 19, 1946 the Viet Minh formally issued orders for a nation-wide resistance against the French.

The war lasted nine years. In 1948, the non-Communist nationalists formed the State of Vietnam, under French aegis, which was formally recognized by the United States in February 1950.

Thus, by the time of the Geneva Conference on Indochina in 1954 there were two Vietnamese states claiming national authority. The Geneva Conference began its discussions of the situation in Indochina on May 8, 1954, one day after the fall of the French fortress at Dien Bien Phu.

III. Geneva Conferences

On July 20-21, 1954, agreements were reached at Geneva which ended the French phase of the Vietnam story. On July 20, 1954, an agreement on the cessation of hostilities in Vietnam was signed by representatives of the DRV and the French Union Forces. Its provisions included: partitioning Vietnam along the 17th parallel; the regroupment of personnel between the

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North and the South; regulations on foreign military presence and armaments; the establishment of the International Control Commission; and reference to reunification by elections.

A day later, on July 21, an unsigned "Final Declaration" of the Geneva Conference was issued in which the participants noted the provisions of the French-DRV cease fire agreements and in which there were references to elections that were to be held to reunify Vietnam on 20 July 1956. The U.S. and South Vietnamese delegates disassociated their governments from the Final Declaration. American delegate Walter Bedell Smith issued a unilateral statement declaring that the United States (1) "will refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb the agreements," (2) "would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security," and (3) "shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections, supervised by the U.N. to insure that they are conducted fairly."

Coincident with the agreements ending hostilities in Vietnam there were similar agreements for Cambodia and Laos. It is well to keep in mind the Laos agreements in view of North Vietnam's blatant violation of its own signed commitments regarding the Laos agreements of 1954 and 1962. In the July 20, 1954 Laotian agreements the DRV pledged that "with effect from the proclamation of the cease fire the introduction into Laos of any reinforcements of troops or military from outside Laotian territory is prohibited."

In the July 23, 1962 declaration of the Geneva Conference on Laos, the DRV, together with the other participants, affirmed that it "will not use the territory of the Kingdom of Laos for interference in the internal affairs of other countries." Needless to say, North Vietnam has neither respected the 1954 nor 1962 agreements on Laos.

IV. The Post-Geneva Interlude

The 1954 Geneva Accords satisfied virtually no one at the time they were signed. The Vietnamese Communists -- now legitimized as the DRV -- were disappointed in getting only half a loaf. They bought this settlement partly as a result of Soviet and Chinese pressure and because they believed (as did virtually everyone else) that the jerry built non-Communist

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political structure south of the 17th parallel would soon collapse. Since partition at the 17th parallel put the majority of Vietnam's population under Communist control, the Communist Party leadership felt sure their acquisition of control over all of Vietnam had been deferred by at most two years; for if South Vietnam did not collapse before then (as most observers considered inevitable), in any 1956 election Hanoi would deliver 99+ percent of a majority of the votes before any southern votes were counted. Nonetheless the Vietnamese Communists felt cheated at having to settle, even temporarily, for less than total victory.

The French were not happy either, but by 1954 the Indochina struggle had become politically unsaleable in France. Thus the Mendes-France government saw the 1954 Accords as a way to get out of Indochina quickly without actually surrendering and thus saving a little face.

The Laniel government fell and Mendes-France became Premier while the 1954 Geneva Conference was in session. When Mendes-France took office he publicly pledged to settle the Indochina war within thirty days or resign. Actually, Mendes-France had a private understanding with the Soviets, who agreed to help him get an Indochina settlement if he would scuttle the European Defense Communist Treaty, which Mendes-France subsequently did. His grandstand play to meet his self-imposed thirty-day deadline, however, had momentous future consequences, for it led Mendes-France to accept partition at the 17th parallel rather than holding out for the 18th or even 19th, i.e., a partition which would have split the population evenly or put a majority south of the line of Communist control -- a split that would have made a genuine electoral contest possible in 1956.

On 7 July 1954, while the Geneva Conference was in progress, the French government appointed Ngo Dinh Diem Premier of the "Associated State of Vietnam" -- i.e., South Vietnam -- under Chief of State Bao Dai. Diem, a stiff-necked and uncorruptible nationalist, had for years been a thorn in the side of the French and the Communists, both of whom had on various occasions attempted to arrest and/or assassinate him. The French, not without ironic malice, thought Diem an ideal choice to hold the bag in presiding over the dissolution of non-Communist Vietnam and going down to political defeat at Hanoi's hands.

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Theoretically, political arrangements in South Vietnam during the 1954-1956 (i.e., post-Conference, pre-plebescite) period were to be handled in partnership between the Bao Dai/Diem government and the French. In fact, however, there was increasing friction between Diem, on the one hand, and, on the other, both Bao Dai and the French. This friction, coupled with France's political instability and fiscal weakness, led to the U.S. assuming an ever larger role.

The SEATO Treaty, signed in September 1954, extended its protection to Vietnam, and opened moves to strengthen South Vietnam without the delays, indecision and sabotage occasioned by French participation.

On 24 October 1954, President Eisenhower announced direct military assistance and economic aid to the Diem government and its armed forces, cutting out the French as middle-men. In February 1955, the U.S. assumed responsibility for the training of Vietnamese forces.

These developments marked the beginning of the French disassociation with Vietnam, and the assumption of an independent role for the U.S. In December 1955, Diem terminated all economic and financial agreements with France and withdrew South Vietnamese representatives from the French Union Assembly.

On 26 April 1956 the French high command was disestablished, and by July had completed the withdrawal of French forces.

Thus, the U.S. became the primary guarantor of South Vietnam's future.

V. The Diem Era: 1954-1963

When Diem took office in 1954, it was universally assumed that his government would quickly disintegrate and collapse. Against all the odds, however, Diem managed to consolidate his power position in the face of political disunity, economic chaos, military challenges from the armed religious sects and persistent efforts to undercut him on the part of both the French and Bao Dai.

On 28 March 1955, Diem moved against the Binh Xuyen, a gambling syndicate which controlled the Saigon police. In May 1955, he launched

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a successful campaign against the armies of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects. In October he won a resounding victory in a popular referendum in which the voters chose between Diem and the French-supported Bao Dai and by which Diem deposed Bao Dai and took Vietnam out of the French Union.

Diem then refused to participate in the 1956 elections called for by the "Final Declaration" of the 1954 Geneva Accords. Diem argued that its record of performance since 1954 demonstrated that the ICC could not guarantee a free election in the North, hence -- with the majority of the population already under Hanoi's control -- a fair electoral contest was not possible.

Diem also noted that the Geneva Agreements were between the French and the Viet Minh, that the South Vietnamese had not been consulted, did not sign anything, and that he had announced at the time that the South Vietnamese would not be bound by these agreements to which they were not a party.

Moreover, the Hanoi regime had already rendered the agreements inoperative by numerous violations -- bringing in weapons from China, keeping part of its army, cadre and arms stockpiles in the South, preventing the movement of civilians from North to South, restricting the ICC, etc.

In its early phase, i.e., until late 1957 or early 1958, the Diem government made great progress. Out of anarchy and chaos it created the beginnings of a potentially viable nation.

Diem's progress peaked, however, and his government's later years were marked by progressive deterioration, accelerated by mounting Communist pressures.

The very qualities which helped Diem survive and succeed in his early years -- stubbornness, inflexibility, tuning out negative advisors, relying only on a totally loyal circle of relatives and trusted intimates, and a messianic conviction in the rightness of his own judgment -- eventually proved his undoing.

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As Communist pressures rose and the situation began to deteriorate in the late 1950's, Diem became progressively more stiff-necked, more reliant on his Catholic co-religionists and his immediate family, particularly his brothers Ngo Dinh Can (de facto ruler of Central Vietnam), Ngo Dinh Nhu and the latter's wife. Step by step, Diem managed to alienate virtually every other group across the non-Communist political spectrum: the peasantry, the politicians and intellectuals, non-Catholics -- particularly the Buddhists -- and, finally, the army.

Resentment at Diem and his style of rule crystallized and focused on the "religious" issue in May 1963 when Buddhist demonstrations in Hue got out of hand and several people were killed. An ugly situation developed. It was fanned by agitation and publicity (including public suicides of Buddhist monks and nuns) and worsened considerably in August 1963 when troops and police acting on Ngo Dinh Nhu's orders raided a number of pagodas.

After two more months of agitation and deterioration, the army stepped in and overthrew Diem's government on 1 November 1963. In the aftermath of the coup, Diem and Nhu -- who did not formally surrender to the rebel forces but tried to escape and were captured while in disguise as Catholic priests -- were executed. The circumstances of their execution are obscure but it was probably ordered personally, and privately, by the nominal leader of the coup, General Duong Van Minh.

VI. Origins and Evolution of the Communist Insurgency

The apparently sure-fire gamble the Vietnamese Communist Party took in accepting the 1954 Geneva settlement did not pay off. South Vietnam was supposed to collapse. The Communists should have been able to win the political struggle against the fledgling GVN almost by default and, in any event, the Party was sure it could come legally to power via the 1956 election contest which it would enter already controlling a majority of the votes, i.e., the population north of the 17th parallel.

In fact, things did not work out this way. The Party's hopes and expectations were frustrated by Diem's early successes in holding the GVN together and maintaining it as an ongoing, steadily improving concern. Though they appeared to hold all the cards, the Communists lost the

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political struggle. In the middle 1950's, as Diem's military and civil apparatus steadily improved, the Party's political fortunes and prospects in South Vietnam progressively deteriorated.

To check this deterioration, in 1957 the Party began augmenting political action and subversion with a small scale but rising program of selective terrorism and assassination. Communist efforts were aided by a series of major errors the Diem government made in its dealings with the rural population -- the abolition of village elections in 1956 and the "agroville" program of 1958 -- which generated rural grievances the Communists were quick to exacerbate and exploit. GVN errors and Communist actions perceptibly slowed the rate of GVN progress in the late 1950's, but in South Vietnam the Communist Party still considered itself in a parlous state.

Hanoi's policy changed radically in 1959. A decisive role in this change was played by a man who, more than any other individual on either side, is personally responsible for the Indochina war: Le Duan. Born in Central Vietnam south of the 17th parallel, Le Duan was a charter member of the Vietnamese Communist Party and has been a member of its Politburo since the early 1940's. As early as 1952 he was in charge of the Party's Southern Region (Nambo) Committee. He ran the southern organization from then through 1956 -- i.e., through the end of the Franco-Viet Minh struggle, Geneva, and the post-Geneva interlude. He was brought back to Hanoi in mid-1957 to replace Truong Chinh as Party First Secretary, though Le Duan did not get the actual title until 1960. He still holds that post. Since Ho's death, Le Duan has emerged as the most senior member of the Party. Though he certainly does not enjoy Ho's unrivalled primacy, he controls the Party organization (throughout Vietnam) and none of his Politburo colleagues is more senior than he. When he assumed the duties of First Secretary in 1957, he obviously acquired a powerful platform from which to argue the cause of the southern organization -- which he had built and until then personally directed.

At the 15th Plenum of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party's Central Committee held in Hanoi in January 1959, the Party decided to initiate armed struggle in the South -- a "war of national liberation" -- to arrest the Party's decline in the South and launch a major counter-attack against Diem.

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In mid-1959, Communist military action in Laos cleared the Ho Chi Minh trail area and laid the groundwork for systematic infiltration to the South, first of southern Party members and cadres who regrouped to the North and were further trained in preparation for the revolutionary struggle and then (in 1964) of North Vietnamese Army (NVA) regulars.

The Party's policy of armed struggle was formalized the following year at the Lao Dong Party's Third National Congress, which met in Hanoi in September 1960. At this Congress, Le Duan was formally named as First Secretary of the Central Committee.

In his political report at the Third National Congress Le Duan called for the establishment of the united national front in the South and laid down the policy of struggle that Hanoi has pursued ever since. Several months later on December 20, 1960 the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NLF) was announced. The NLF was to be the front under which the liberation struggle would be waged, while the Lao Dong Party's actions, controlling hand, and personnel would be concealed.

In 1961, the Lao Dong Party re-established COSVN -- which Le Duan had set up during the French war -- of the Central Committee to guide the liberation struggle. It is this organization -- COSVN -- and not the so-called NLF or the Provisional Revolutionary Government at the present time that is the controlling authority in the South and which is part of and responsible to the Central Committee and Politburo.

With these measures the Party's decline in the South was arrested, inroads were being made against Diem's forces and the Party's control began widening. According to Communist records, from a mid-1959 level of only 5,000 Party members, by late 1961 the number of Party members had jumped to 34,800. Diem's control of the countryside proved to be "a mile wide but an inch thin" and the Party's military and civil forces were making inroads into that control.

1962 was not a good year for the Communists. With the presence of U.S. advisors and the aggressive use of helicopters, government forces pressed the attack against the enemy. The strategic hamlet program seemed to be gathering momentum.

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1963 was an indecisive year militarily. Communist forces were learning how to better cope with and resist ARVN's techniques, but no one side made significant gains. Momentum on the non-Communist side was checked, however, by mounting political discord which culminated in Diem's November 1963 overthrow which, in turn, produced an inevitable "shake-out" period of great instability. In December 1963 Hanoi decided to capitalize on this instability by committing NVA regulars to combat in order to achieve an early victory before the non-Communists in the South could get themselves reorganized.

The December 1963 decision of the 9th Plenum of the Lao Dong Party Central Committee to commit NVA forces to the war was implemented in the fall and winter of 1964. Organized NVA forces were present in the northern part of South Vietnam in late 1964 and in early February 1965 NVA regulars attacked Camp Holloway near Pleiku in the highlands killing a relatively large number of American personnel. This action led to a U.S. retaliatory air strike against North Vietnam and marked the start of our air war.

In the meanwhile, the Party Politburo had dispatched to COSVN a senior general officer and Politburo member to lead the Party's southern directorate now that the struggle's nature was evolving. In the fall of 1964, General Nguyen Chi Thanh left Hanoi for COSVN which was to be his duty station until his death in July 1967. Later in 1967, Politburo member Pham Hung, a vice Premier in the Hanoi government, was sent from Hanoi to replace General Thanh.

The presence of Politburo members from Hanoi, as well as several NVN army generals, was further proof that this insurgency was controlled and directed from Hanoi.

The 11th and, in particular, the 12th Plenums in August and December 1965, respectively, of the Central Committee proved to be milestone meetings of the Party. It was decided at the December 1965 12th Plenum that the Party's course in militarily opposing and meeting the Americans head on was the correct policy. First Secretary Le Duan also related in his speech to the Plenum that the Politburo was charged with the responsibility of deciding when to engage in negotiations and that in any event the strategy was to be one of "fight-talk-fight."

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During the summer of 1967, there was another strategy review in Hanoi at which Le Duan again carried the day in arguing for further escalation. These 1967 debates led to the decision to make a major military push in 1968 -- launched with the Tet offensive -- and then augment military pressure with negotiations.

Current Communist strategy on the battlefield and in Paris is still following the basic guidelines laid down in 1965 and reaffirmed in the summer of 1967.

VII. The U.S. Role

The U.S. is actually a relative latecomer to the complex struggle whose evolution and historical background are outlined above. The argument that Hanoi's strategy and actions were all responses to U.S. "escalation" simply does not square with the historical record.

Until well after World War II, America -- and the government in Washington -- showed little concern for or knowledge of Indochina. President Roosevelt was reluctant to see Frence re-establish itself as a colonial power in the area, but the record shows this to have been a peripheral concern in the context of much larger interests. The OSS in China did endeavor to use the Viet Minh apparatus for intelligence and armed action missions against the Japanese, but the Viet Minh leadership was much more interested in acquiring assets and readying itself for future political struggle in Vietnam than in wasting assets against the Japanese. In the aftermath of World War II, Ho Chi Minh did make a play for U.S. political support in combatting the French, but the thesis that greater U.S. receptivity to these overtures would have changed Ho's goals or policies is -- to put it charitably -- oversimplified.

The U.S. continued to show minimal interest in Indochina developments during the first years of the Franco-Viet Minh struggle. This was regarded as a French problem and U.S. interests were centered on European security.

The U.S. concept of Asia and its interests therein were radically changed by the Communist take-over of China in 1949 (without which the Viet Minh could not have defeated the French) and, above all, by the

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Korean War, which was started by the North Koreans in June 1950 and in which the Chinese Communists intervened massively in December 1950.

These events in Asia, coupled with what at the time appeared to be a valid concern that a French defeat in Indochina might lead to a Communist take-over in France, caused the U.S. Government to take cognizance of Indochina and what was happening there.

The whole climate of the early 1950's was, of course, quite different from today's domestic and international climate -- though (somewhat ironically) today's climate is in many ways the result of steps taken and policies adopted to cope with the problems of the decade that followed the end of World War II. Things that are ancient history to the present generation of students and young professors (forgotten if ever known, but in any event now deemed "irrelevant") were very much on the minds and desks of those who set U.S. policy in the late 40's and early 50's: The Soviet imposition of Communist rule throughout Eastern Europe after World War II, the coup in Czechoslovakia, the Berlin Blockade, the 1947 Truman Doctrine in Greece and Turkey, the 1948 Marshall Plan to rebuild a prostrate Europe, the heyday of Stalinism, the first Soviet nuclear explosions, and -- as noted above -- the Communist conquest of China and the launching of overt Communist aggression in Korea. If the policies and attitudes of that period are to be understood in retrospect, it must be remembered that the Vietnamese Communists' fight against the French in Indochina was being actively (and indispensably) aided by the Chinese Communists whose troops were simultaneously fighting against U.S. forces in Korea.

On 1 May 1950, President Truman took the first real step of U.S. involvement in Indochina by announcing the initial allocation of U.S. aid to the French effort there. On 27 June 1950, President Truman announced an acceleration of aid and the dispatch of a military mission.

On 3 August 1950 the lead elements of a U.S. Military Assistance and Advisory Group were assigned to Indochina to supervise the delivery of U.S. military materiel. This group originally had 70 men, though by 1954 the size had grown to 342. U.S. aid to Indochina totalled $119 million in FY 1951 and rose steadily to the level of $815 million in 1954. By the time of the 1954 Geneva Conference, total U.S. aid to Indochina amounted to some $2.6 billion and we were funding approximately 80% of the French war effort there.

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By the time President Eisenhower took office in 1953, the French position in Indochina was clearly eroding. Within his government and cabinet there were those who advocated direct U.S. military participation -- particularly at the time of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954 -- but President Eisenhower rejected these arguments and confined the U.S. role to that of giving the French materiel assistance.

The U.S. posture and degree of participation in the 1954 Geneva Conference has already been discussed. In the course of events after Geneva, the U.S. dealt progressively less with and/or through the French and progressively more directly with the new Government of Vietnam and its Premier, Ngo Dinh Diem.

On 25 October 1954, President Eisenhower sent a message to Diem offering U.S. aid "to assist Viet-Nam in its present hour of trial, provided that your Government is prepared to give assurances as to the standards of performance it would be able to maintain in the event such aid were supplied."

On 26 October 1955, the U.S. Government acknowledged the deposition of Bao Dai and recognized President Diem as Chief of State.

During the late 1950's, the U.S. provided the Diem government with economic assistance and military aid and advice. The size of the MAAG rose to 685. The first U.S. military casualties occurred in the summer of 1959 when two American servicemen were killed in a Communist attack on the small U.S. advisory team at Bien Hoa.

When President Kennedy took office in 1961, the situation in South Vietnam was deteriorating under the mounting Communist attack which the Party, as explained above, had launched in 1959. During President Kennedy's tenure in office, the total of U.S. military personnel jumped from 875 to over 16,000.

In addition, President Kennedy authorized limited U.S. participation in the struggle in the shape of helicopter support, air reconnaissance operations and assistance to intensified covert paramilitary operations in Laos and South Vietnam.

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President Kennedy's death occurred three weeks after Diem's. President Johnson inherited an Indochina situation that rapidly worsened because of the instability in the aftermath of Diem's overthrow that accompanied the inevitable period of political shake-out and because of Hanoi's December 1963 decision to capitalize on this instability and strike for victory by injecting elements of the North Vietnamese Army directly into the struggle. These regular forces began appearing in the South in late 1964 and by early 1965 were whipsawing the South Vietnamese Army.

President Johnson was thus faced with the problems generated by rapidly mounting North Vietnamese pressure which made a Communist military conquest of South Vietnam look ever more likely.

The first air strikes against North Vietnam were authorized by President Johnson in August 1964 as a reprisal for the attacks against U.S. destroyers in the Tonkin Gulf. In October 1964, he authorized the bombing of the Laotian infiltration routes over which North Vietnamese supplies and regular units were moving South. In February 1965 our sustained bombing program against the North began. By the spring of 1965, ARVN was on the verge of defeat. It was at this point that President Johnson made the decision to introduce U.S. combat forces. The first contingent of Marines landed at Danang in March of 1965 to protect the Danang airfield. They were followed by Army combat units and eventually U.S. forces in Vietnam reached a maximum of 543,000.

From this peak of U.S. involvement, U.S. policy changed, first with President Johnson's call for negotiations in his speech of 31 March 1968 then with President Nixon's policy of Vietnamization and U.S. disengagement from direct ground force participation in combat.

The record of the past two years does not need to be recited here. The point that does need to be understood and that the historical record cited above demonstrates is that U.S. involvement in Indochina was the consequence, more than the cause, of a complex chain of events stretching over four decades. The Indochina war did not derive from U.S. actions. Instead it is rooted in the Vietnamese Communists' unswerving drive for political control over all of Indochina and Hanoi's deliberate post-1959 strategy of attempting to impose that control by force of arms.

Approved For Release 2006/12/19 : CIA-RDP80R01720R000200160014-4